

West Feliciana Railroad Right of Way  
Woodville Vicinity  
Wilkinson County  
Mississippi

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C.

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# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## West Feliciana Railroad Right-of-Way

Location: Between Woodville, Mississippi and Hardwood, Louisiana.  
(Wilkinson County)

Date of Construction: c. 1835.

Present Owner: Illinois Central Gulf Railroad.

Present Use: Abandoned.

Significance: The sites of the West Feliciana line, its Office and Banking House, and the early twentieth-century Depot are significant as one of the most important concentrations of railroad history in the Deep South and in the nation. So far from the rail centers of the east coast, this rural region of Mississippi and Louisiana exhibited amazing foresight in railroad development, its efforts contemporary with those in the American railroad capital of Baltimore and equivalent English cities. Socially, politically, culturally, and industrially, Mississippi was still a frontier, with approximately one-half the land in the state still owned by Indian nations. Only a small fraction of the state was in the hands of private owners. The determination of a few farsighted planters from both Mississippi and Louisiana assured the West Feliciana's charter in 1831 as the first interstate railroad company in the southern United States. Its Office and Banking House, though architecturally significant, is more important as one of the four oldest extant railroad buildings in America, as well as one of Mississippi's three oldest existing banking houses. Combined with the railroad line and the Office and Banking House, the twentieth century Depot represents the peak of the system's development, physically establishing the mid-point of this mature railroad's history.

WEST FELICIANA RAILROAD COMPANY  
RIGHT-OF-WAY, OFFICE AND BANKING HOUSE, AND DEPOT  
WILKINSON COUNTY  
PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The West Feliciana Railroad extends from a river landing at Bayou Sara, Louisiana, to Woodville, Mississippi. The railroad runs parallel to Thompson Creek for most of its length, then along the old road which runs from St. Francisville to Woodville. Although the surrounding countryside is broken and hilly, this route is on relatively level terrain, and few bridges had to be constructed. The original rails were six-inch-square heart pine, yellow poplar, or red cypress, twenty-one feet long, with iron strap fastened by screws to the top. These rails rested on cross sills spaced four feet apart. An advertisement, which appeared in several issues of the Woodville Republican during construction of the line, reads:

FOUNDATION SILLS--5,280 pieces, 3 inches by 12 inches, cut to length not less than 16 feet--sawed of red cypress, yellow poplar, or heart pine.

CROSS SILLS--12,072 pieces, 4 inches by 8 inches and 7 feet in length, sawed of red cypress, white oak, yellow poplar, or yellow heart pine--or 12,072 pieces hewn 22 inches from each end to not less than 4 inches by 8 inches, the intervening space remaining rough, and the hewn ends of the stick perfectly out of winding--length not less than 7 feet.

RAILS--4,024 pieces, 6 inches by 6 inches, cut in 21 feet lengths, sawed of red cypress, red cedar or yellow heart pine.

All the timber will be required to be of the best quality, cut full size with square edges, clear of sap, wind shakes and heart cracks. Persons making proposals are requested to specify the particular kind of timber they will furnish and the price per thousand feet, board measure.

By order of the Board of Directors of the West Feliciana Railroad Company.

Saml. H. Kneass  
Chief Engineer  
Woodville, Wilkinson County, Miss.  
20th January 1835.

Progress has replaced these built-up rails of the early nineteenth century to the more modern rolled "I" rail, but the right-of-way has remained the same. The

terminus at Woodville is directly in front of the Woodville Republican; there was no depot originally, the existing one not having been constructed until ca. 1910. A rectangular one-story building topped by a gable roof, this simple depot is ornamented only by a bay section facing the tracks.

Two blocks away, also located on Depot Street around the town square, the Office and Banking House of the West Feliciana Railroad Company is a two-story, stuccoed brick building in the amphiprostyle temple form. Approximately forty feet square and forty feet to the peak of the hip roof, the building's cubic proportions immediately reveal its vernacular inception. Divided into five equal bays, the front and rear elevations are enriched by hexastyle porticos in the Tuscan order supporting a gallery at the second-floor level, and above, an entablature reduced to its simplest form, one wide fascia. Interestingly, this entablature returns to the facade and blends into the pilaster strip as if the two members were one. The formation of this continuous element rising from the veranda floor, following the portico, and dropping to the floor at the other end heightens the applied effect so common to porticos in Greek Revival structures. On the front elevation the facade is pierced by doors in the second and fourth bays on the first floor, with windows filling the remaining positions, while at the second-floor level at all openings are French doors with transoms which allow full access to the gallery. The rear elevation features doors in the third and fifth bays on the first floor; in the first bay, however, the window is expressed by a shallow stuccoed reveal. Oddly, the second floor has only four bays, eliminating the second bay entirely, but including two inner pairs of French doors and windows in the end bays. Windows throughout the Banking House are six-over-six, double-hung sash, and all openings are without architrave or other exterior trim, in keeping with the heavy, restrained character of the building. One of the two original chimneys remains and lightens

somewhat the bold silhouette of the building, but only the gallery's iron balustrade with its light geometric lines details the exterior.

The tone of the interior is also massive and restrained, but with decorative emphasis on wooden members and surfaces. All rooms are plastered and have a standard ceiling height of fourteen feet. The original floor plan, now slightly altered, featured a large banking room across the front half of the first floor, backed by two offices and a corner stair hall entered from the rear veranda. At the southeast corner of the banking room is the original vault with a handsome iron door unit cast in Grecian motifs. Windows and doors on the first floor are enframed with broadly molded architraves. An elliptical stair, housed in its own room, combines turned balusters, delicate brackets, and a dramatic flair at both the foot and head to create an amazingly graceful statement in this otherwise severe interior. On the second floor, the woodwork is a lighter, symmetrically molded window and door trim, with impost blocks and molded panels below the window sills. Including the stair hall, there are five rooms on the second floor: two large front rooms and three smaller ones at the rear. In two rooms the fireplaces have retained their wooden mantels with Tuscan columns supporting a paneled frieze and a shelf. Original hardware is intact on all doors throughout the building, including the vault. Flooring on the first floor is of twentieth-century vintage, but the wide pine flooring on the second floor is original.

Although the Banking House has been allowed to deteriorate, it is in good structural condition and is being restored by the Woodville Civic Club to house its museum of Southern decorative arts. One club member is presently acquiring the depot for use in the possible recreational development (excursion trains) of the right-of-way, soon to be abandoned and sold by the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Company.

William C. Wright  
Historical Archaeologist  
Gregory B. Free  
Restoration/Preservation Specialist  
April, 1978

WEST FELICIANA RAILROAD COMPANY  
RIGHT-OF-WAY, OFFICE AND BANKING HOUSE, AND DEPOT  
WILKINSON COUNTY  
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The West Feliciana Railroad, the first interstate line in the South, was a joint venture of Mississippi and Louisiana planters seeking a more efficient means of transporting their cotton to the river. Initiated in 1828 and constructed in 1836-42, it is the oldest railroad in the Mississippi Valley, and its 1834 Office and Banking House stands as one of the earliest railroad buildings in the United States, built within the first five years of American railroad construction. It was the first railroad in the South to adopt the English Standard Gauge of four feet, eight and one-half inches.

The railroad was established by an act of the Louisiana legislature, signed by Gov. Andre B. Roman on March 25, 1831. On December 20 of the same year, Gov. Gerard C. Brandon of Mississippi signed a legislative act incorporating the railroad, which was to extend from the Mississippi River landing at Bayou Sara, Louisiana, to Woodville, Mississippi. Interior cotton planters, previously limited to the use of oxen, could now have a much faster means of transporting their bales to the river.

The Mississippi charter names the following officers: Joseph Johnson, president; Edward S. McGehee, J. L. Trask, J. Ogden, C. S. Kellogg, S. S. Boyd, George H. Gordon, Charles C. McDermott, and J. L. Louis, directors; and B. L. C. Wailes, cashier. Books for subscription were opened in June, 1832, under the supervision of Judge Edward S. McGehee, and the sum of \$1,500 was subscribed the first day. On December 23, 1833, the Mississippi legislature passed an act to grant the company full banking privileges, with headquarters in Woodville. Railroad and banking business was carried on at the Woodville office of C. S. and H. D. Kellogg, two attorneys deeply involved in the railroad's affairs. Stockholders met at the courthouse before 1834,

and payment for stock was made at the Woodville branch of the Planters' Bank or at the "Branch Bank of Louisiana, at St. Francisville" (Woodville Republican, Aug. 23, 1834). It was in 1834 that the railroad company constructed its handsome Greek Revival Office and Banking House. On December 13, the first notice of a stockholders' meeting at the Banking House appeared in the Woodville Republican, although the company did not acquire full title to the property until May 16, 1836 (Deed book K:14).

Construction of the West Feliciana rail line, begun in 1835, was not an easy task. When many large landowners refused the line a right-of-way across their property, the Mississippi legislature enacted legislation making it possible to build the railroad in almost any situation. Labor was also a problem. One contractor absconded with the payroll of his Irish laborers, who in turn sued the railroad for back wages in the amount of \$350,000. The court settlement reduced the claim to a mere \$.06½. This unpleasantness made it difficult for honest contractors to hire laborers. To compound these difficulties, the original estimate of \$10,000 per mile for construction soon rose to almost \$25,000 a mile. By 1836, the company began to recover, and construction was once again under way.

The first eight miles from St. Francisville, Louisiana, was completed by 1836, and the first published schedule of rates appeared in the January 16, 1836, issue of the Woodville Republican. The rates were based on transporting freight by other means to the railhead, where it was loaded on the railroad to be forwarded to the river. In October, 1842, the Republican announced that the railroad would be completed to Woodville within the month, and, on October 13, the first train to complete the trip between St. Francisville, Louisiana, and Woodville, Mississippi, entered the town amid great excitement. "Planters and their families came from

miles around to witness the thrilling spectacle of a puffing iron horse drawing a train of cars. The town put on its gala attire and celebrated 'the greatest event in Woodville's history' in fitting style" (Corliss p. 258). Regular service on the West Feliciana was begun on October 20, 1842.

The West Feliciana prospered until the Civil War, when it was pressed into Confederate service. "On April 23, 1861, the railway's directors passed a resolution providing free transportation to Confederate military companies and war material [sic]" (Estaville p. 99). The company issued paper notes ranging from ten cents to twenty dollars, and, toward the end of the war, people of the region turned to West Feliciana Railroad 'money' as a medium of exchange. Finally, the railroad was reduced to mule-power operation, when under military orders its only remaining locomotive, "Escape," was dismantled to provide copper and other metals for the Confederate forces. By 1865, the railroad had ceased all activity, "its right-of-way a mass of woods and brambles its bridges and ties rotting away and its rails but 'two streaks of rust'" (Corliss p. 259).

For twelve years, the West Feliciana lay in ruins, and by the 1870s its banking office had become a boarding house. In 1875, the track was repaired, and once again steam engines were running on the road. The railroad continued in operation until 1888, when it was purchased by the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railroad. In 1892, its stock was purchased by the Illinois Central Railroad (now part of the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad), and it has been operated by that company to the present. The Banking House during this decade became the Woodville post office and remained in this use until 1949. Railroad business was conducted in the small depot constructed ca. 1910 adjacent to the rail line. The Banking House later served as the county welfare office, until its purchase by the Woodville Civic Club in 1973



for restoration and development as a museum. Today the depot stands vacant, but its acquisition is being considered by local citizens.

The sites of the West Feliciana line, its Office and Banking House, and the early-twentieth-century Depot are significant as one of the most important concentrations of railroad history in the Deep South and in the nation. So far from the rail centers of the east coast, this rural region of Mississippi and Louisiana exhibited amazing foresight in railroad development, its efforts contemporary with those in the American railroad capital of Baltimore and equivalent English cities. Socially, politically, culturally, and industrially, Mississippi was still a frontier, with approximately one-half the land in the state still owned by Indian nations. Only a small fraction of the state was in the hands of private owners. The determination of a few farsighted planters from both Mississippi and Louisiana assured the West Feliciana's charter in 1831 as the first interstate railroad company in the southern United States. Its Office and Banking House, though architecturally significant, is more important as one of the four oldest extant railroad buildings in America, as well as one of Mississippi's three oldest existing banking houses. Combined with the railroad line and the Office and Banking House, the twentieth century Depot represents the peak of the system's development, physically establishing the midpoint of this mature railroad's history.

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